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TRANSFORMING MALAYSIAN TEACHER AGENCY
THROUGH CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Enhancing teachers' agency is critical because it may help to ensure students' success in second language learning. Thus, English teachers are provided with continuous professional development (CPD) programmes and activities to enhance their professional knowledge, experiences, skills, attitudes, teachers' beliefs, and classroom practices so that they can improve the learners' learning process. However, the English standard of Malaysian students is still low. This study aims to explore the best way to create CPD programme that can transform the teacher agency in Malaysia. Using a comprehensive review of recent published research articles, this paper discusses the different models of CPD, their challenges, and strategies to improve the programmes. The review illustrates that CPD can be best carried out on online platforms and that it has to be tailored to the different needs and characteristics of the teachers. Empowering teacher agency through CPD is significant in assisting the government in improving language proficiency among Malaysians as well as contributing to effective strategies for improving the educational quality in Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013–2025.

Keywords:

Teacher Agency, Continuous Professional Development, Educational Quality.

Introduction

Agency can be defined as the power of an individual to change an already-existing situation (Manan, Channa, David & Muhammad Amin, 2021) and an essential component of quality and meaningful education is teacher agency (Cong-Lem, 2021). Teacher agency is a situation

where teachers have the freedom to use their discretion and judgement in adapting their curriculum and instruction to meet the varied and shifting needs of their students (Biesta, et al., 2015). It is important to recognize teachers' expertise so that they can equip students with good quality education that addresses their students' social and emotional needs (Zeichner, 2019). Emotion management is required by teachers when teaching English as a foreign language or as a second language as it can assist students' academic performance (Wang & Fe, 2021). In fact, the role of teacher agency should be reformed ranging from bottom-up change initiatives to externally produced comprehensive school reform models, as well as those that depend on teacher engagement and participation as research partners (Lockton, Weddle & Datnow, 2020).

Continuous professional development (CPD) or also is known as teachers' professional development (TPD) programme plays a pivotal role in ensuring that teachers are well-versed with the content and pedagogical understanding of an education policy. It is fundamental in sustaining teacher professionalism in keeping abreast with the pedagogical changes in contemporary education climate and reforms. All Malaysian teachers are made compulsory to complete a minimum of 42 hours or 7 days CPD programmes per year in order to expand and enhance their content knowledge, pedagogical skills and soft skills as stated by the Ministry of Education (2009). They include school-based workshops, conferences, trainings, and seminars (Kabilan & Kasthuri, 2013 as cited in Rafiza, Dalwinder, Siti Hajar & Zahri, 2021). This has put the ESL teachers are the centre stage in coping with the current changes in the curriculum that stresses on the integration of Information and Communication Technologies in education (Rafiza et al., 2021) and the adoption of CEFR-aligned curriculum starting from January 2018 (Abdul Hakim, Wan Zhafirah & Radzuwan, 2020).). The Malaysian National Education Philosophy and Policy stresses the significance of CPD, integrating it into In-Service Training (INSET) programmes led by the Teacher Education Division under the Ministry of Education (MOE). These programmes are especially crucial for teachers tackling the critical subjects such as English (Leong & Rethinasamy, 2023). Although the teachers claim to have all the skills and appropriate methods, studies show that they are not creative enough in their approaches and ideas (Sani & Ismail, 2021) and do not adopt teaching styles that can inspire and create interest among students to study English (Taib, Nair, Gopalan & Sedhu, 2022). Some teachers are exam-oriented and simply transfer knowledge instead of enhancing understanding, which does not comply with the policy of the Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) Curriculum Specification (Huzaina, 2013). This may indicate that the CPD programs provided for Malaysian teachers are not sufficient or effective. Therefore, it is the interest of this paper to look further into this issue. The paper discusses the different CPD models in Malaysia, their challenges and strategies for a more effective CPD in future.

The Different CPD Models

There are a number of CPD models which include the training model, the award-bearing model, the deficit model, and the cascade model that address different aspects of teacher development and quality assurance (Kennedy, 2005 as cited in Leong & Rethinasamy, 2023). The cascade model is particularly pertinent to CPD in Malaysia especially in the realm of School-Based Assessment (SBA). This is because of its cost-effectiveness and reachability speed to many teachers in a short timeframe (Pang & Wray, 2017). Cascade model is also adopted by CEFR-aligned curriculum where the model focuses on the transfer of "top-down" knowledge from experienced teachers, also known as Primary Trainers (PTs), to Secondary Trainers (STs) or multipliers at various levels (Abeyseena, Philips & Poppitt, 2016).

Another type of CPD is called Flipped Teacher Professional Development (FiT-PD) where its rationale in teacher professional development started from flipped learning research in education programmes for effective professional development. It is also known as blended learning and hybrid learning where there are “shifts direct instruction from a group learning space to an individual learning space” (Bergmann & Sams, 2014). The distinction between online learning and flipped or blended learning is in the modes of instructions whereby the former is conducted virtually without the face-to-face component but the latter, on the contrary, has the online component, but conducted during class time alongside face-to-face instruction (Odamanova, Baimisheva & Burkitbayeva, 2021). When traditional classrooms are unable to cater the multifaceted needs and skills of the Teaching English with Technology flipped learning, instructional videos are pre-recorded and uploaded for learners’ convenient access.

The objectives of flipped classroom are to optimise face-to-face interactions with students and instructional materials. Bergmann and Sams (2014) pointed out that “it is not feasible to deliver instruction to a large group through a face-to-face meeting, and the best setup is the one in which the face-to-face time is used to help students understand the content.” Learner autonomy can be achieved through active engagement in learning, thus very beneficial in addressing diverse needs. Therefore, flipped classroom is deemed to suit the teacher professional development programmes.

In addition, teachers’ professional development can also be in the form of multi-platform online applications. Teacherfiera.com is one of the examples. It acts as support medium among ESL teachers. It is considered as an informal learning platform for the ESL teachers since there is no fixed curriculum or programme to be followed but only based on the sharing of knowledge and experience made personally by users while being moderated by the administrators. According to Abdul Hakim Ali et al. (2020), Teacherfiera.com consists of a BlogSpot website, a Facebook group and a Telegram group that are integrated to become a unified platform that can be utilised as a learning. This platform has been established and maintained by two Malaysian ESL teachers and Master Trainers, Wan Zhafirah Binti Wan Zainudin and Abdul Hakim Ali Abdul Aziz Hakim together with a Senior Lecturer from University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Associate Professor Dr. Radzuwan Ab Rashid to assist Malaysian Primary School English teachers in implementing the new CEFR-aligned curriculum (Abdul Hakim Ali et al., 2020)

The Challenges

CPD in Malaysia has its own challenges. In the Malaysian context, CPD or TPD programmes have received mixed responses in terms of its effectiveness. A study by Mohamad Marzaini, Haslee Sharil, Supramaniam and Mat Yusoff (2023) found that the implementation of the TPD programme for CEFR-aligned Classroom-Based Assessment (CEFR CBA) was inefficient despite it was highly transmissive due to lack of practicality required to ensure the dissemination of knowledge throughout the entire cascade system. The barriers identified include “the uncertainty of conducting in-house training, non-option teachers, participant engagement, and limited time, impede the TPD's ability to fulfil its purpose of coaching and mentoring teachers to implement the CEFR CBA.” (Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023). In addition, the failure of the system is also due to dilution of knowledge as it passes through the cascade tiers and stages (Abeysena et al., 2016). Consequently, the teachers are still stuck with exam-oriented assessment even though they have been exposed to CEFR CBA content and pedagogical knowledge (Arumugham, 2020). Furthermore, the CEFR-aligned curriculum has

poses difficulties for many teachers especially the non- ESL majors as they are struggling in how to go about implementing it.

Furthermore, a few studies in local settings found that teachers were not supportive of the CPD programmes for various reasons. They faced disadvantages in terms of time constraints, uncondusive working environments and disappointment over lack of say about their interests in the development program curriculum (Mukundan & Khandehroo, 2009; Khandehroo, Mukundan & Alavi, 2011). In addition, CPD programmes that consist of one-time workshops, courses and conferences have received unfavourable comments for not able to prepare teachers with knowledge and skills they require. Teachers often learn content information that are unrelated to them by passively listening to the expert speakers which did nothing for their skills enhancement, competence and practical teaching (Desimone, 2011; Pak, Desimone & Parsons, 2020).

In addition, the cascade model which has been widely used in various contexts for its cost-effectiveness and speediness in reaching out the teachers quickly, most teachers in East Malaysia and in particular, Sarawak may be left out in the process. According to Leong and Rethinasamy (2023), there is a limited amount of research on the effectiveness of these programmes specifically targeting its application and effectiveness. Leong and Rethinasamy (2023) pointed out, “The most recent and extensive research on this came from Talib, Kamsah, Naim and Latif (2014) of 400 teachers in the state of Johor, where they found that only 50 percent of the participants felt that they were confident in implementing school-based assessment practices. The teachers highlighted that there was insufficient time for training, not enough opportunities to conduct practical training, and that the trainers themselves were not adequately versed in school-based assessment practices.” To add to that the teachers’ view on the programmes are less preferable as they find them too taxing (Pang & Wray, 2017; Kabilan & Veratharaju, 2013).

In terms of the implementation of the programmes for CEFR CBA, the obstacles are in the unpredictability of in-house training in certain respective schools. According to Mohamad Marzaini et al. (2023), this is because even the master speakers or facilitators (ELP Heads) who were trained by the primary trainers (SISC+) through workshops possess limited knowledge about CEFR CBA policy. They were expected to train the teachers in the absence of the primary trainers (SISC+), therefore, making the training at the school less efficient. Mohamad Marzaini et al. (2023) stated, “In fact, most ELP Heads claimed that they have the uncertainty to cascade the information they received from the trainers.” Implementing CPD programmes for CEFR curriculum at school poses enormous challenges for non-option teachers. This is due to their incomprehensive pedagogical and content knowledge which affect the execution of the programmes at the school level. Mohamad Marzaini et al. (2023) stressed that “ELP Heads claimed that most of the non-option teachers were having a limited knowledge in ESL field and language assessment due to the different background. These teachers were forced to teach English in order to fulfil the needs of school organization.”

The Strategies

The Internet and social platforms have become prominent nowadays that they have become the alternative methods for the improvement of CPD programs. Online teacher professional development (OTPD) programmes have been designed to contain courses and learning opportunities via online interactions with other teachers or facilitators. They are convenient as

they can be readily accessible in any location and time. They not only allow collaboration among teachers in the virtual community but also offers flexibility and support teachers to access resources that are unavailable locally. Additionally, they provide professional development opportunities to teachers in rural and remote areas by having courses at respective locations. According to Rafiza et al. (2021), a study conducted by Reeves and Li (2012) discovered that ESL teachers participating in OTPD have shown a favourable attitude towards online-mediated professional development Teaching English with Technology.

In Malaysia, the online platform like Teacherfiera.com, is very useful in helping the teachers in providing question and answer feedback and accurate information about the English curriculum. According to Abdul Hakim Ali et al. (2020), Teacherfiera.com has been able to assist the teachers in implementing CEFR in Malaysia whereby the materials from the platform are used by Education Officers and trainers within the Ministry of Education Malaysia during their training sessions nationwide. They are also utilised by more than 40000 Malaysian English Language teachers all over Malaysia. In view that the cascade training programmes are insufficient in terms of reflective learning, time constraints, and after-training support and follow-up provided by the Ministry of Education for the new curriculum, Teacherfiera.com has been resourceful as support system for the teachers. Abdul Hakim Ali et al. (2020) said, "Teacherfiera.com provides in-house made materials, such as printable picture cards, books, modules, audio clips as well as PowerPoint slides that are fully compatible with the new curriculum, while at the same time hosting a platform for discussion on the materials as well as other topics related to ESL teaching in Malaysia. More importantly, the administrator together with other members also provides online training for ESL teachers using videos and online chat, on how to conduct lessons and the use of different types of materials."

In relation to CEFR CBA, coaching, supervision and mentor-mentee system have been established and implemented to support the community of learning to new teachers. "Mentors' roles cover the process of imparting the knowledge to the new teachers at the same time ensuring the teachers can apply pedagogical practices that is aligned to the needs of policymakers. In this sense, this method of coaching is perceived to support teachers' professional growth in implementing new knowledge at field (Ali et al., 2018 as cited in Mohamad Marzaini et al., 2023).

Moreover, in order to achieve further improvements for the CPD programs, seminars, workshops, and future programmes should be targeted in different areas which take into account certain target groups according to age, seniority, and professionalism needs. This is "in order to meet the dimensions of teacher PD disposition with a specific need that are suited to the different preferences and aspirations of teachers." (Ruzana, Radzuwan, Sarah, Hanita, Hadeel, Baderaddin & Omar, 2022). It is significant to identify the characteristics that can influence teachers' interests in participating in CPD programmes. Program designers and trainers should be well equipped to tackle the needs of teachers.

Conclusion

It is important that teachers improve their teacher agency by participating in CPD programmes so that that they have up-to-date knowledge of all the lesson plan stages, adhere to them when teaching, employ a range of teaching pedagogies when mentoring, create standard and successful lesson plans, recognise the significance of evaluation and assessment in the teaching process, employ cutting-edge methods to assess students, maintain records of their ongoing

assessments, and keep track of their past assessments. They must recognise the benefits of continuous professional development (CPD) on their teaching performance in order to deliver high-quality instruction, stay current with system advancements, and set a great example for students. However, there are drawbacks of CPD programmes and activities such as those pertaining to impracticality, difficult curriculum, lack of teachers' voice, irrelevant content, inadequate trainers, and lack of time to practice. CPD programmes through online platforms can be the best way to overcome those challenges and help to enhance teacher agency in Malaysia.

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